

Committee on Coast Defences

To Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for War

We, the undersigned, members of a Committee appointed to visit and report upon the Martello Towers and Batteries on the coasts of Suffolk, Essex, Kent and Sussex, by order of Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for War, have the honour to submit our detailed Report, of which an abstract has already been furnished.

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We must observe that the long interval of delay which has elapsed from the date of the report until the present time is attributable to the little leisure which performance of our ordinary duties leaves at our disposal.

T.B. Collinson, Colonel R.E. C.R.E. Dover District
H. Montague, Colonel R.E. C.R.E. (Colchester) Eastern District
C.E. Cumberland, Brevet Lieut-Colonel R.E. C.R.E. Brighton District

J.C. Ardagh, Captain R.E., Secretary, Dover, 17th January, 1873.

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Littlehampton

19. Littlehampton, at the mouth of the river Arun, is a tidal harbour, nearly dry at low water, and having 15 feet of water at springs and 10 at neaps. The Arun is navigable for small steamers as far as Arundel, and it communicates by canals with the interior. The battery for its protection is situated close to the west pier of the harbour, and is now armed with five 68 pounder smooth-bore guns. Littlehampton is not now comprised in the districts reported upon. The Committee therefore did not visit it, but they are informed by the Commanding Royal Engineer of the Brighton district, who recently had it on charge, that it is in detail almost identical with the battery at Shoreham, which they now describe.

Shoreham

20 Shoreham Redoubt stands on the spit of shingle immediately to the west of the entrance, in a position precisely similar to that of work at Littlehampton. In neither case are the sites at danger from encroachment from the sea, both being protected by piers and groynes on the western side of the entrances.

Shoreham redoubt was commenced in 1857, shortly after the completion of work at Littlehampton, from which it only differs in having six guns instead of five.

The position gives a good command over the approaches to, and the entrance of the harbour, as well as the beach on either side; but being isolated from the mainland, it could not readily be supported or reinforced. The enceinte cannot be considered secure against even the casual attack of a party landing in boats, and the armament is obsolete. The same description will apply to Littlehampton.

The Committee are of opinion that, both in construction and armament, these works are inadequate to afford a sufficient degree of protection to the respective harbours; and they consider that either the existing works should be re-modelled, extended, and re-armed, or that entirely new works should be constructed; fulfilling, in either case, the conditions laid down in their preliminary observations. At Littlehampton, no site can be better than that occupied by the existing work.

At Shoreham, however, in consequence of the peculiar lateral extension of the harbour on either side of its mouth, many alternate schemes may be suggested.

Summary

183. We have described in detail the harbours, anchorages, and coastline between Portsmouth and the Wash, the existing defences, and those which we believe should be constructed in order to give security to the small harbours for several days, a fair protection to the anchorages, and an efficient yet moderate and economical permanent addition to the defence of the coast.

184. Excepting Newhaven, Dover, and Harwich, there is not, on the whole extent of the coast which we have visited, a single gun capable of making any impression upon an ironclad ship; of rifled ordnance there are indeed only five 110 pounder B.L. guns to be found, the usual armament of the towers, batteries and forts being obsolete smooth-bores. It is possible at this moment for an unarmoured cruiser, carrying heavy rifled guns, to attack any of these works along the coast, at ranges which would deprive them of the power to reply; an armoured vessel might approach close to them with almost complete immunity. Although the obsolete smooth-bore armament might be of some slight use to oppose boats, we cannot but entertain a grave apprehension that the dispiriting effect of fighting with weapons of known inferiority would have serious influence on even the best troops as to make it a question whether it would not be better to have no guns at all than such as are now mounted.

185. The works generally have parapets of insufficient thickness to resist modern artillery, but in most cases they are capable of improvement. In many places, however, there are no defences, and in some there never were. The extent of our proposals for new works and armaments is as limited as possible, consistent with the condition of being able to fire on a ship, and in some measure to oppose landing over all the vulnerable parts of the coast between Selsey Bill and Orford Ness. The relative importance of the different objects is as follows, viz:- 1st Harbours; 2nd Anchorage; 3rd Coastline.

186. The existing coast defences are then in an inefficient and most unsatisfactory condition, urgently needing improvement. Not even lining the beach with troops, nor all the light artillery which could be brought up could compensate for the absence of heavy guns to oppose the approach of vessels.....

Conclusion

198. Of the 104 existing works we recommend that 39 should be remodelled in construction and armament; that 25 should be slightly improved and rearmed; that 40 should be maintained in their present condition as emplacements for guns, as well as to afford store and barrack accommodation when occasion may arise, provided the expenditure in maintenance should remain as small as it is now is, viz, about one-third per cent of the original cost.

199. We have further recommended the construction of 37 new works, viz 5 small forts, 25 towers, and 7 batteries.

200. The total cost of carrying out these recommendations would be about three quarters of a million sterling.

Recommendations

Littlehampton – Remodel fort and arm partly or wholly with heavy guns

Shoreham – To be maintained and reconstructed if practicable, otherwise new work necessary, arm partly or wholly with heavy guns